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The division of labor in close relationships: An asymmetrical conflict issue

ESTHER S. KLUWER,^a JOSÉ A. M. HEESINK,^b AND
EVERT VAN DE VLIERT^b

^a*Free University at Amsterdam* and ^b*University of Groningen, The Netherlands*

Abstract

This research addresses couples' reports of their (hypothetical) attempts to maintain or change a gendered division of labor through conflict interactions. Two experiments in which spouses responded to scenarios showed that spouses reported more conflict over the division of housework than conflict over paid work and child care, and that wives more often than husbands desired a change in their spouses' contribution. Spouses reported more wife-demand/husband-withdraw than husband-demand/wife-withdraw interaction during hypothetical conflict over the division of labor, but only when the wife desired a change in her spouse's contribution. Together, the data imply that wife-demand/husband-withdraw interaction is a likely response to the asymmetrically structured conflict situation in which the wife is discontent with her husband's contribution to housework, while her husband wants to maintain the status quo. We further showed that defenders of the status quo were more likely expected to reach their goal than complainants. In the role of complainant, wives were more likely expected to reach their goal than were their husbands, but only when the conflict issue concerned their own gender stereotypical domain (i.e., family work).

The division of labor between husbands and wives has interested many social scientists over the past decades. It is a well-known fact that wives still do a much larger share of the housework and child care than their husbands, regardless of their own or their husband's employment status, both in the United States (for reviews, see Ferree, 1991; Menaghan & Parcel, 1990; Spitze, 1988) and in Europe (Kalleberg & Rosen-

feld, 1990; Kluwer, Heesink, & Van de Vliert, 1996, 1997; Mikula, Freudenthaler, Brennacher-Kröll, & Schiller-Brandl, 1997). In their endeavor to explain this gendered role allocation, social scientists have taken various theoretical perspectives. One of the earliest approaches, the *resource approach*, argued that resources such as income, occupational status, education, and time are "exchanged" for domestic labor (e.g., Blood & Wolfe, 1960; Coverman, 1985). Others have studied the effects of *structural factors* such as wives' working hours and the number and age of the children (e.g., Barnett & Baruch, 1987; Cowan & Cowan, 1987). The *gender role ideology model* claimed that beliefs and attitudes toward gender roles are responsible for the division of domestic work (e.g., Greenstein, 1996). Recently, the *life-course perspective* has focused on the effects of the timing, sequencing, and duration of life events such as marital timing

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Address correspondence to Esther Kluwer, Free University, Department of Social Psychology, Van der Boechorststraat 1, 1081 BT Amsterdam, The Netherlands. E-mail: es.kluwer@psy.vu.nl.

and child bearing upon the task allocation (e.g., Pittman & Blanchard, 1996).

These perspectives generally start from the principle that the division of labor is a static agreement between spouses. Relatively little attention has been paid to the way couples constitute, maintain, or change the gendered division of labor through their mutual interactions. (For some exceptions, see Deutsch, Lussier, & Servis, 1993; Kluwer et al., 1997; Scanzoni & Fox, 1980). Prior research lacks the notion that the division of labor is actively negotiated between spouses on a continuous basis (cf. Greenstein, 1996; Pittman, Solheim, & Blanchard, 1996). However, given the social changes with regard to women's participation in the labor force and relationships becoming more egalitarian, gender roles increasingly become subject to explicit negotiation (Buunk, Kluwer, Schuurman, & Siero, in press; Kluwer et al., 1997). Recently, we offered an *interaction-based approach* to the division of labor by studying how couples negotiate a division of labor in their relationship (Kluwer et al., 1996, 1997, 1999). This perspective starts from the notion that gender roles are produced and maintained in everyday life through interpersonal interaction and that the enactment of gender primarily takes place within the context of social interaction (e.g., Deaux & Major, 1987).

The first goal of the present research is to increase further our knowledge within this larger general framework by studying couples' reports of hypothetical conflict over the division of labor. We will argue that conflict issues regarding the division of labor often involve one spouse (the complainant) who desires change while the other spouse (the defendant) wants to maintain the status quo. Conflict research (for reviews, see De Dreu, Harinck, & Van Vianen, 1999; Levine & Thompson, 1996; Lewicki, Weiss, & Lewin, 1992; Thomas, 1992) has largely ignored the distinction between complainants and defendants, implicitly assuming that both conflict parties have equal complaints against each other (Pruitt, 1995). Although Pruitt and his colleagues (Peirce,

Pruitt, & Czaja, 1993; Pruitt, 1995) brought this distinction to the attention of conflict researchers, our knowledge of asymmetrical conflict is still limited. Hence, our second goal is to gain insight into the impact of asymmetrical conflict structures on marital interaction and outcomes.

This research first addresses the *conflict issues*: What do spouses fight most often about with regard to the division of labor—his or her distress, about paid work, housework, or child care? Although the division of labor is among the top-five issues that cause relationship conflict (Belsky & Kelly, 1994; Kluwer et al., 1996, 1997), research on close relationships has paid relatively little attention to the ways couples deal with contentious issues (cf. Fincham & Beach, 1999). Contentious issues elicit immediate anger and distrust and therefore tend to cause normally happy couples to get caught up in destructive interaction patterns (Holmes & Murray, 1996). In studying how couples manage their conflicts over the division of labor, we focus on asymmetrical *demand/withdraw interactions*, a destructive interaction pattern that has been shown to play a significant role in conflict over the division of labor (Kluwer et al., 1997). Finally, we address the asymmetrical *outcomes of conflict* over the division of labor—status quo maintenance versus change.

Marital Conflict Over the Division of Labor

We expect the division of housework to be a greater source of marital conflict than the division of paid work (cf. Kluwer et al., 1996, 1997). Spouses will perceive their working hours to be relatively static because they are usually tied to a labor contract. Also, an unequal division of housework is more likely to cause distress and conflict than an unequal division of child care. Housework is generally rather disliked, often regarded as a burden or duty (Mikula et al., 1997), and people tend to prefer doing less rather than doing more (Kluwer et al., 1996). Child-care tasks tend to be more pleasant and rewarding than

housework. In addition, perceiving the division of child-care tasks as unfair and experiencing conflict over its allocation is a delicate issue because it may be interpreted as *not caring about the child* (Mederer, 1993). Hence, *we predict that conflict over the division of housework occurs more frequently than conflict over paid work or child care* (Hypothesis 1a).

We expect wives' rather than husbands' discontent with the division of labor to cause marital conflict. Compared with their husbands, wives generally have a disadvantaged position when it comes to the labor distribution. Also, wives typically have greater knowledge and experience with regard to housework and child care, which may cause them to be more critical toward their spouse than husbands are to their wives (cf. Margolin, Talovic, & Weinstein, 1983). In addition, when spouses fight about paid work, the issue often concerns the husband's overtime (Kluwer et al., 1996). In sum, *we expect that wives more often than husbands desire a change in their spouses' contribution to the division of labor* (Hypothesis 1b).

Demand/Withdraw Interaction Patterns

Picture the typical situation in which the wife is discontent with her husband's contribution to housework and wants him to increase his participation. Whereas she wants to change the status quo and needs his active cooperation to reach her objective, his goal is to maintain the status quo, and he can reach this goal by doing what he normally does. In fact, he is likely to avoid a discussion and withdraw from the interaction because it may force him to do more housework. This conflict contains an asymmetrical structure: One spouse (the complainant) desires a change in the other spouse's behavior, while the other spouse (the defendant) is satisfied with the status quo of the relationship. During conflict with this particular structure, complainants are likely to pressure the other for change, whereas defendants will avoid a discussion that may lead to a change in their own be-

havior (cf. Klinetob & Smith, 1996; Peirce et al., 1993; Pruitt, 1995).¹

In close relationships, this type of interaction has been labeled *demand/withdraw interaction*: One spouse attempts to engage in a discussion, resorting to pressures and demands, while the other attempts to avoid conflict and withdraws from the discussion. Research has shown that women tend to demand and men tend to withdraw in marital conflict (e.g., Christensen & Heavey, 1990, 1993; Heavey, Layne, & Christensen, 1993). Demanding behavior is used as a general term for "pursuing" tactics—pressuring, requesting, or demanding change, nagging, blaming, accusing, and criticizing. Withdrawal entails "distancing" behaviors, such as physical withdrawal, becoming silent, defending, and avoiding a discussion. This finding is a notable exception to research that shows either small or inconsistent gender differences in conflict behavior (see Kluwer, De Dreu, & Buunk, 1998).

Why do women demand and why do men withdraw in close relationships? Developmental theories claim that men have developed a *self differentiated from others*, whereas women have developed a *self in relation to others* (Chodorow, 1978; Cross & Madson, 1997; Gilligan, 1982; Miller, 1986). Subsequent socialization reinforces men's achievement orientation and need for autonomy and women's relationship orientation and need for connectedness (Eagly, 1987; Maccoby & Jacklin, 1987; Miller, 1986). This gender difference permeates social interactions and it predicts women to be pursuing in their search for connectedness, whereas it predicts men to withdraw in pursuit of their autonomy (cf. Gray-Little & Burks, 1983). Others have claimed gender differences in conflict behavior to be evolution based (e.g., Buss, 1989), the result of gender differences in physiological arousal (Gottman & Levenson, 1988), or a function

1. We emphasize that the terms "complainant" and "defendant" refer to the *roles* of conflict parties (i.e., wanting change versus wanting to maintain the status quo), not to subsequent conflict behaviors.

of gender role orientation (e.g., Markman, Silvern, Clements, & Kraft-Hanak, 1993).

Although women show an overall tendency to be demanding and men to be withdrawing in marital conflict, there is evidence that situational influences moderate this gender difference (Christensen & Heavey, 1990, 1993; Heavey et al., 1993). The structure of the conflict appears to determine the roles men and women take during the interaction. Adopting a social structural view, some investigators argue that men are the primary beneficiaries of the traditional marriage, are more likely to have structured the relationship to their liking and subsequently have little or less interest in changing the status quo (Heavey et al., 1993; Jacobson, 1989). Women tend to be less satisfied with the status quo of the relationship (cf. Buunk & Van Yperen, 1989); thus, engagement in conflict is their means of changing the relationship according to their desires. Indeed, Ross and Van Willigen (1996) showed that women had higher levels of anger due to inequalities in the relationship and were more likely to express their anger than were men.

To summarize, women show an overall tendency to be demanding and men to be withdrawing in marital conflict, but primarily when the wife wants to change the status quo. *We therefore expect wife-demand/husband-withdraw interaction to occur more frequently than husband-demand/wife-withdraw interaction during conflict over the division of labor, but only when the wife desires a change in her spouse's contribution to the division of labor* (Hypothesis 2).

Study 1

As a first test of Hypotheses 1 and 2, we conducted a survey in which participants read and responded to stimulus information manipulated by means of scenarios. We used open-ended questions to elicit participants' representations of the interaction patterns without being constrained by an existing questionnaire. Although self-report measures of conflict have limitations,

they also have several advantages for the present study. It encourages participants to report on private matters such as perceived conflict (see Harvey, Hendrick, & Tucker, 1988), and it enables participants to report on conflict avoidance and withdrawal, which is less likely to occur in a laboratory setting. In contrast to the common use of correlational designs in research on the division of labor, the use of scenarios enabled us experimentally to vary the roles of complainant and defendant as well as the conflict issue. In addition, our method allowed us to use a large "real-life" sample of couples as opposed to a student sample.

Method

Design and scenario. The scenario described a conflict situation in which one spouse (the complainant) was dissatisfied with the time the other spouse spent doing paid work, housework, or child care, while the other spouse (the defendant) was satisfied with the status quo (see Table 1). The design was a 2×3 factorial, involving Complainant (husband versus wife) and Conflict issue (paid work versus housework versus child care), both manipulated between-subjects.

The between-subjects factor Complainant was construed by crossing the gender of the participant with the role in the scenario (complainant or defendant). In other words, the *Complainant is husband* condition contained male participants in the role of complainant ("You are dissatisfied . . .") and female participants in the role of defendant ("Your spouse is dissatisfied . . ."). The *Complainant is wife* condition contained female participants in the role of complainant and male participants in the role of defendant.

Participants and procedure. A total of 121 husbands and 141 wives participated in this study. (Both spouses of 117 couples participated and 28 subjects participated while their spouses did not.) Spouses had shared their household for 7 years on average. To standardize the family situation of the cou-

Table 1. Conflict scenarios**Paid work condition:**

"You are (your spouse is) dissatisfied with the time your spouse (you) spends on paid work. For example, you are (your spouse is) dissatisfied with how much your spouse works, how often your spouse (you) works overtime, works at home or during the weekend, how much attention your spouse (you) pays to work, or how often your spouse (you) talks or thinks about work. In other words, you (your spouse) want a change in the time your spouse (you) spends on paid work. However, your spouse is (you are) satisfied with the situation as it is."

Housework condition:

"You are (your spouse is) dissatisfied with the time your spouse (you) spends on household tasks. For example, you are (your spouse is) dissatisfied with how much attention your spouse pays (you pay) to housework, how often your spouse (you) tidies, cleans, does the dishes, does groceries, or the way your spouse (you) carries out chores, etcetera. In other words, you (your spouse) want a change in the time your spouse (you) spends on housework. However, your spouse is (you are) satisfied with the situation as it is."

Child-care condition:

"You are (your spouse is) dissatisfied with the time your spouse (you) spends on child care tasks. For example, you are (your spouse is) dissatisfied with how much attention your spouse pays (you pay) to your child, how often your spouse (you) feeds the child, changes diapers, soothes the child, plays with the child, or takes the child back and forth to day care. In other words, you (your spouse) want a change in the time your spouse (you) spends on child care. However, your spouse is (you are) satisfied with the situation as it is."

Note: The wording for the spouse is in parentheses.

ples and to control for the effects of the number and age of children, the criterion for selection was that the first and only child was under 18 months old ($M = 14.5$, $SD = 1.4$). The mean ages of men and women were 32.9 and 30.4 years, respectively. Participants were in a research program on the division of labor across the transition to parenthood. Husbands and wives received their questionnaire at home in a separate envelope that was addressed to them personally. They were instructed not to discuss the questionnaire with their spouse until they had completed it, and they returned their questionnaires in separate envelopes. Non-respondents were reminded by phone. Eventually, 74% of the participants returned their questionnaire by mail. Participants were individually assigned to experimental conditions on a random basis. Because of small variations in the response rates between conditions and because of missing data, the number of male participants in the conditions varied between 17 and 23 and the number of female partici-

pants in the conditions varied between 21 and 26.

Dependent variables. Participants read the scenario and were instructed to try to imagine they were in the described situation. Employing an open-ended question, we asked participants to write down how they and their spouse would deal with the described situation. Three female judges independently rated all answers to the open-ended question. They were uninformed as to the design or hypotheses under study and the gender of the participant, although the latter sometimes became apparent from the answer when participants explicitly mentioned their "husband" or "wife," instead of their "spouse" or "partner." Judges completed one day of training that consisted of a discussion of detailed descriptions of the constructs that were to be rated. Judges then practiced rating 10 answers as a group and 10 answers individually. The interrater agreement was as-

sessed for each answer, and disagreements were solved through discussion.

Judges independently rated all answers. After reading the entire answer, judges rated the degree to which the following behaviors were representative for the answer (1 = not representative to 4 = very representative): The participant pressures the spouse, blames the spouse, discusses, defends, withdraws, and avoids (cf. Conflict Rating System; Heavey et al., 1993; Christensen & Heavey, 1990). The same items were used to rate the behavior of the spouse. Afterwards, data were recoded as to the gender of the participant (i.e., when the participant was male, "participant discusses" became "husband discusses" and when the participant was female, "participant discusses" became "wife discusses"). As a measure of interrater agreement, Cronbach's alphas were computed between judges. Alphas for the behavior items ranged from .70 to .89, with a mean of .80. As a measure of the consistency of the subscales, Cronbach's alphas were computed across the individual ratings for the items of the subscales. The demand-subscale consisted of the items "pressuring the spouse" and "blaming the spouse" (alpha = .81 for husband-demand and .82 for wife-demand). Consistent with Gottman and Krokoff (1989) and Christensen and Heavey (1990), the withdraw-subscale consisted of the items "withdrawing" and "avoiding" (alpha = .77 for husband-withdraw and .64 for wife-withdraw). To create the *demand/withdraw interaction* variables, both wife-demand and husband-withdraw and husband-demand and wife-withdraw were summed (cf. Christensen & Heavey, 1990; Klinetob & Smith, 1996).²

Finally, we asked participants how often

the described situation occurred in their daily lives (1 = *never* to 7 = *very often*).

Results

Because we collected data among couples, spouses' responses are likely to be dependent. This nonindependence violates the independence assumption, and the significance tests may be misleading when using the total sample (Kenny, 1995, 1996). Because of the individual assignment to the experimental conditions, however, most couple members reported on different conflict situations. It was therefore not justified to analyze the data at the couple level. Instead, we conducted the analyses for husbands and wives separately so that the *F*-tests would not be biased by nonindependence. We checked whether the hypothesized effects were qualified by interactions with Gender of participant (as a between-subjects variable) in the total sample. None of the hypothesized effects were qualified by interactions with Gender of participant, *F*s < 1, *ns*.

Conflict over the division of labor. A 2×3 (Complainant \times Conflict issue) between-subjects analysis of variance (ANOVA), with the frequency to which the described situation occurred in daily life as the dependent variable, showed main effects of Complainant among husbands, $F(1, 115) = 9.05, p < .01$, and wives, $F(1, 134) = 10.79, p < .001$ (see Fig. 1). The situation in which the wife desired a change in her husband's contribution was reported to occur more frequently than the situation in which the husband desired a change in his wife's contribution, among both husbands ($M = 2.98, SD = 1.50$ versus $M = 2.33, SD = 1.04$), and wives ($M = 3.06, SD = 1.40$ versus $M = 2.25, SD = 1.21$). The main effect of Conflict issue was also significant among husbands, $F(2, 115) = 5.14, p < .01$, and wives $F(2, 134) = 5.67, p < .01$. Husbands reported more conflict over housework ($M = 3.10, SD = 1.45$) than conflict over paid work ($M = 2.48, SD = 1.34$), $t(78) = 2.01, p < .05$, or child care ($M = 2.32, SD = .99$),

2. Judges also gave an overall rating of wife-demand/ husband-withdraw and husband-demand/wife-withdraw interaction (interrater agreement = .81 for both). The overall rating of wife-demand/ husband-withdraw interaction correlated .72 with the composite wife-demand/husband-withdraw measure. The overall rating of husband-demand/wife-withdraw interaction correlated .69 with the composite husband-demand/wife-withdraw measure.

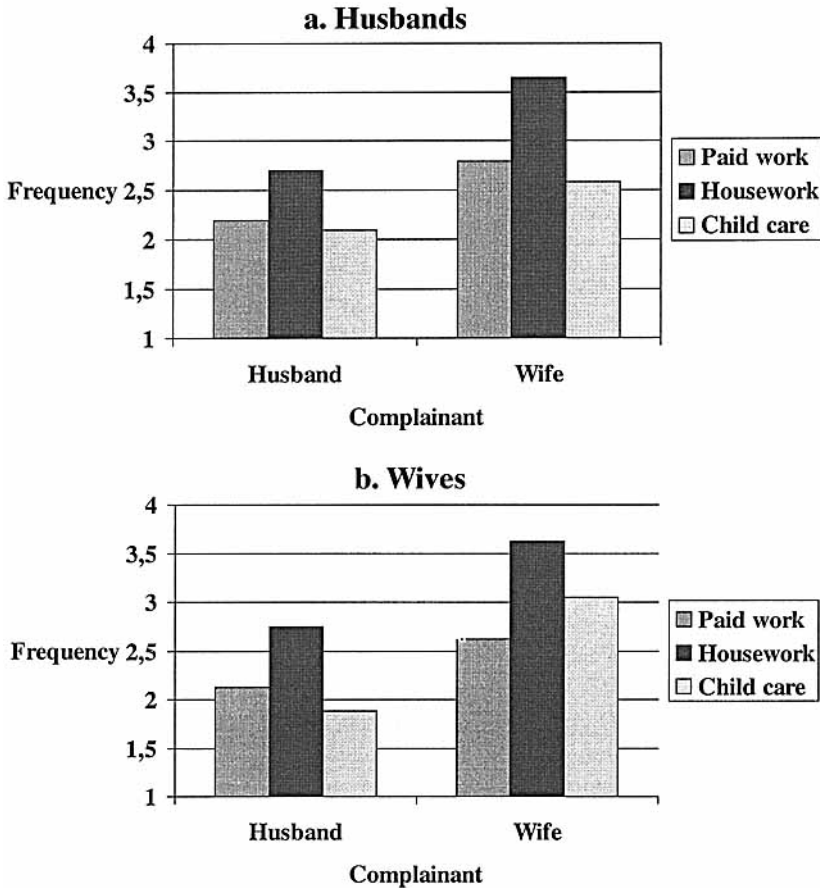


Figure 1. Reported frequency of conflict situation as a function of complainant and conflict issue for husbands (a) and wives (b): Study 1.

$t(79) = 2.85, p < .01$. The latter two did not differ significantly, $t(79) = .61, ns$. Likewise, wives reported more conflict over housework ($M = 3.16, SD = 1.24$) than conflict over paid work ($M = 2.39, SD = 1.38$), $t(92) = 2.82, p < .01$, or child care ($M = 2.41, SD = 1.34$), $t(89) = 2.74, p < .01$. Again, the latter two did not differ significantly, $t(93) = .09, ns$. The interaction effects of Complainant by Conflict issue were not significant, $F_s < .88, ns$. Thus, in support of Hypotheses 1a and 1b, both husbands and wives reported that conflict over housework occurred more frequently than conflict over paid work and child care and that wives more often desired a change in their spouses' contribution than did husbands.

Demand/withdraw interaction. Hypothesis 2 was tested with a 2×2 (Complainant \times Demand/withdraw interaction) ANOVA, with Demand/withdraw interaction as repeated measures (see Fig. 2).³ The main effect of Complainant was not significant among husbands and wives, $F_s < 2.0, ns$. The main effect of Demand/withdraw interaction was not significant among husbands, $F(1, 115) = 1.30, ns$, and was marginally significant among wives, $F(1, 115) = 3.52, p < .10$. In support of Hypothesis 2, the analysis revealed significant interaction effects of Complainant by Demand/withdraw pattern

3. We repeated this analysis for the overall ratings of demand/withdraw interaction, and this revealed identical results.

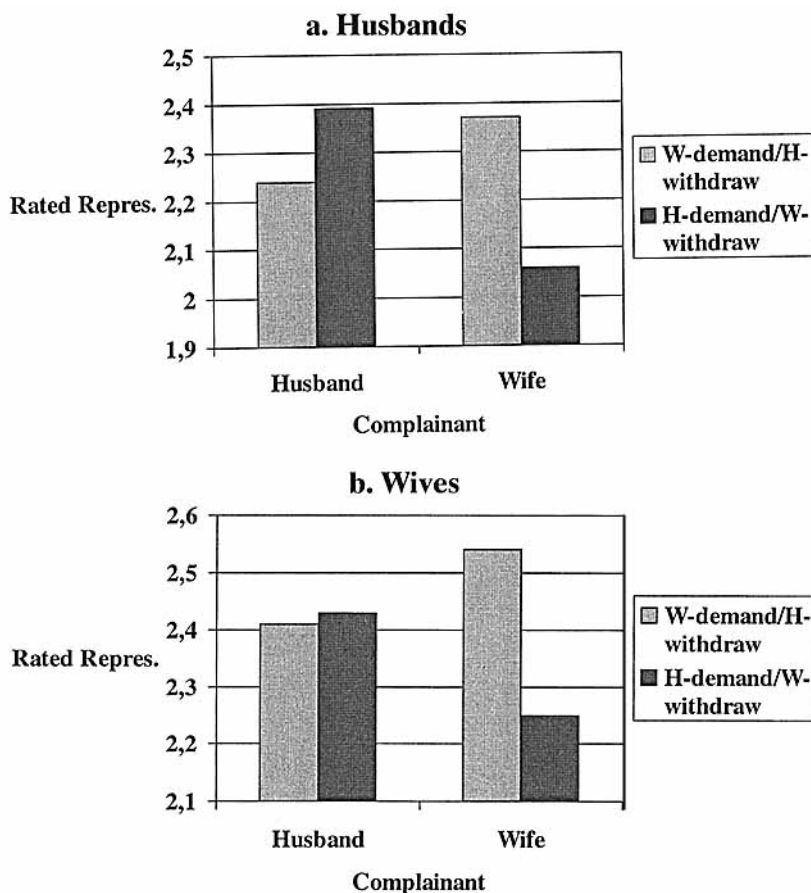


Figure 2. Rated representativeness of demand/withdraw interaction as a function of complainant for husbands (a) and wives (b): Study 1.

among husbands, $F(1, 115) = 10.26, p < .01$, and wives, $F(1, 115) = 4.69, p < .05$. Among husbands, wife-demand/husband-withdraw interaction ($M = 2.37, SD = .74$) was rated as more representative than husband-demand/wife-withdraw interaction ($M = 2.06, SD = .15$) when the wife was the complainant, $t(53) = 3.15, p < .01$. When the husband was the complainant, the rated representativeness of husband-demand/wife-withdraw ($M = 2.39, SD = .59$) and wife-demand/husband-withdraw ($M = 2.24, SD = .55$) interaction did not differ significantly, $t(62) = 1.45, ns$. Likewise, among wives, wife-demand/husband-withdraw interaction ($M = 2.54, SD = .75$) was rated as more representative than husband-demand/wife-withdraw interaction ($M = 2.24,$

$SD = .45$) when the wife was the complainant, $t(65) = 2.97, p < .01$. The rated representativeness of husband-demand/wife-withdraw ($M = 2.43, SD = .69$) and wife-demand/husband-withdraw ($M = 2.41, SD = .74$) interaction did not differ significantly when the husband was the complainant, $t(71) = .20, ns$.

We checked whether the conflict issue further qualified these effects with a $2 \times 3 \times 2$ (Complainant \times Conflict issue \times Demand/withdraw interaction) ANOVA, with Demand/withdraw interaction as a repeated measure. This only revealed a significant main effect of Conflict issue among wives, $F(2, 132) = 3.95, p < .05$. Demand/withdraw interactions were rated more representative among wives in the housework

($M = 2.54$, $SD = .58$) and child-care ($M = 2.44$, $SD = .54$) conditions than in the paid work condition ($M = 2.25$, $SD = .38$), $t(92) = 2.87$, $p < .01$ and $t(91) = 1.92$, $p = .05$, respectively. The means in the housework and child-care condition did not differ, $t(87) = .86$, *ns*. None of the interaction effects were significant, $F_s < 1.0$, *ns*.

In sum, Hypothesis 2 was supported among both husbands and wives. Husbands and wives reported more wife-demand/husband-withdraw interaction than husband-demand/wife-withdraw interaction during hypothetical conflict over the division of labor, but only when the wife was the complainant.

Discussion and Introduction to Study 2

Study 1 showed that wife-demand/husband-withdraw interaction was reported more frequently than husband-demand/wife-withdraw interaction during the hypothesized conflict over the division of labor, but only when the wife desired a change in her spouse's contribution. In addition, conflict over housework was reported to occur more frequently than conflict over paid work and child care. The analyses showed identical results for male and female participants. However, analyzing the data for husbands and wives separately is not currently viewed as the optimal strategy for analyzing couple data (e.g., Gonzalez & Griffin, 1997; Kenny 1995, 1996). Instead, gender should be included as a factor that is repeated within couples, which requires couple members to be assigned to the same condition.

Furthermore, an interesting question that has remained unanswered is to what extent spouses who strive for change in the division of labor are able to accomplish this. Accordingly, our third research question involves the distributive outcomes of conflict over the division of labor: *To what extent do spouses reach their goal—status quo maintenance versus change?* Research on conflict in close relationships generally addresses the consequences of marital conflict in terms of general relationship outcomes such as marital quality and dissolution.

Conflict outcomes that directly concern the conflict issue (e.g., who wins the argument) are rarely considered. In addition, we are not aware of any research that directly considered outcomes in conflict situations with an asymmetrical structure, let alone in relation to gender.

Distributive outcomes: Status quo maintenance versus change

In general, complainants depend on the cooperation and leniency of the defendant, that is, whether the defendant is willing to change his or her behavior. Defendants have a major advantage over complainants: The status quo is on their side and this gives them more power over the outcome. Typically, those who want less have more to say, and those who desire change are in a less powerful position (see Babcock, Waltz, Jacobson, & Gottman, 1993; Keltner & Robinson, 1997; Waller & Hill, 1951). Hence, defendants determine the outcome to a greater extent than do complainants (cf. Pruitt, 1995). Of course, one could argue that defendants need the cooperation of complainants to maintain the status quo. For example, the husband who wants to maintain the current division of labor depends on his wife to do her share. The wife has control over the status quo because she can stop doing housework altogether. However, this outcome is most likely *worse* for the wife than maintaining the status quo (cf. Kelley, 1979, p. 25). This suggests that complainants indeed have less control over the outcome than defendants because the complainant's influence strategy leads to a situation in which they are both worse off than before.

Research on human information processing and decision making has found evidence for *status quo bias*, the tendency for people to disproportionately stick with the status quo (Ritov & Baron, 1992; Samuelson & Zeckhauser, 1988; Schweitzer, 1994). People tend to prefer the current state of affairs because changing the status quo involves the need to formulate a new arrangement, transition costs, ambivalence,

risk, and uncertainty. People are committed to their past decisions and often believe that past alternatives have been chosen wisely (Schweitzer, 1994). Also, regulations that have been used in the past are frequently perceived as just (Mikula et al., 1997).

Preference for the status quo has also been explained in terms of loss aversion (Kahneman & Tversky, 1984; Ritov & Baron, 1992). Changing the status quo entails gains and losses across different dimensions. Because people are loss averse and losses weigh more heavily than commensurate gains, people will be inclined to favor the current state of affairs. As a consequence, loss aversion favors stability over change (Kahneman & Tversky, 1984). The frame of outcomes does not only affect conflict parties' preference for the status quo, but it also affects their concession behavior. Conflict parties with a gain frame concede more and settle more easily than conflict parties with a loss frame (see De Dreu, Carnevale, Emans, & Van de Vliert, 1995). Because defendants face a potential loss and complainants face a potential gain (cf. Fobian & Christensen-Szalanski, 1993), complainants will yield more easily than will defendants during the interaction and, consequently, will more often fail to reach their goal. Following from the above, *we expect that defendants of the status quo are more likely to reach their goal than complainants during conflict over the division of labor* (Hypothesis 3a).

Demanding behavior is likely to increase the chance of goal accomplishment. Even though its use enhances conflict escalation, coercion tends to be effective in changing behavior (Noller, Feeney, Bonnell, & Callan, 1994; Patterson, 1982). Demanding behavior is considered a power strategy in close relationships (Babcock et al., 1993). Obviously, withdrawing behavior on the part of the complainant strongly decreases the chance that the spouse changes his or her behavior. Rather, it will result in status quo maintenance. Because women are more likely to demand than men, especially when they want to change the status quo,

and men are more likely to withdraw than women, even when they desire change, we expect women to be more successful in their attempt to change the status quo than men *in the role of complainant*. Hence, our Hypothesis 3b: *Women complainants are more likely to reach their goal than men complainants*.

Study 2

Study 2 employed the same design and scenarios as Study 1. It was designed to replicate the findings with regard to Hypothesis 2 using Gender as a repeated measure. In addition, we now used the Communication Patterns Questionnaire (Christensen & Sullaway, 1984) to measure demand/withdraw interaction. To extend Study 1 and to test Hypotheses 3a and 3b, we included measures of the distributive outcomes of the conflict.

Method

Participants and procedure. A new sample of 128 couples participated in this study. Spouses had shared their household for 6 years on average and had a first child younger than 18 months old ($M = 9.86$, $SD = 4.97$). The mean ages of men and women were 32.0 and 27.8 years, respectively. Participants were recruited by assistants at 13 child health centers. (Child health centers are commonly used in the Netherlands.) Husbands and wives received their questionnaires at home, in a separate envelope that was addressed to them personally. They were instructed not to discuss the questionnaire with their spouse until they had completed it, and they returned their questionnaires in separate envelopes. Non-respondents were reminded by phone. Eventually, 71% of the participants who initially agreed to participate returned their completed questionnaire by mail. Couples were assigned to experimental conditions on a random basis. Owing to small variations in response rates between conditions, the number of couples in the conditions varied between 17 and 24.

Dependent variables. Participants read the scenario and were instructed to try to imagine they were in the described situation. Participants thereafter indicated how they would deal with the described situation. *Demand/withdraw interaction* was measured with the Communication Patterns Questionnaire (CPQ; Christensen & Sullaway, 1984). Participants rated the likelihood that each interaction pattern would occur (1 = *very unlikely* to 7 = *very likely*). Wife-demand/husband-withdraw and husband-demand/wife-withdraw interaction were each measured by three items: "I try to start a discussion while my spouse tries to avoid a discussion"; "I pressure, nag, or demand while my spouse withdraws, becomes silent, or refuses to discuss the matter further"; and "I criticize while my spouse defends him- or herself." We also asked each item in reversed form so that the items were presented with both spouses in each of two roles.

Although the reliability and validity of the CPQSF have been demonstrated by others (e.g., Christensen & Heavey, 1990, 1993; Heavey et al., 1993; Klinetob & Smith, 1996; Noller & White, 1990), the alpha reliabilities were quite low (Cronbach's alpha = .63 for wife-demand/husband-withdraw interaction and alpha = .53 for husband-demand/wife-withdraw interaction) and could not be improved by omitting items. In past research, the alpha reliabilities of the demand/withdraw subscales have been found to vary between .50 and .85, with a mean of .74 for wife-demand/husband-withdraw interaction and .65 for husband-demand/wife-withdraw interaction (Christensen & Heavey, 1990; Heavey et al., 1993; Klinetob & Smith, 1996; Kluwer et al., 1997). Failure to achieve a high reliability may be caused by using a 3-item scale. (According to the Spearman Brown Prophecy formula, an alpha of .53 corresponds to an alpha of approximately .70 if the scale had consisted of five items; Nunnally, 1978.) It should be noted that low reliabilities provide conservative tests of significance (cf. Nunnally, 1978).

Finally, we asked participants how likely

the following *conflict outcomes* would be in the described situation (1 = *very unlikely* to 7 = *very likely*): "My spouse's (my) time spent on housework (paid work/child care) remains unchanged, like my spouse (I) wants," and "My spouse's (my) time spent on housework (paid work/child care) changes, like I (my spouse) want." The first item always meant that the situation remained unchanged (*defendant reaches goal*) and the second item meant that the situation changed as the complainant desired (*complainant reaches goal*).

Results

When dyad members are not interchangeable, such as in heterosexual couples, nonindependence can be estimated by a regular Pearson correlation coefficient (Gonzalez & Griffin, 1997; Kenny, 1995, 1996). The responses of the husband and the wife correlated moderately (.37 for wife-demand/husband-withdraw interaction; .19 for husband-demand/wife-withdraw interaction; and .26 and .36 for both conflict outcomes, $ps < .05$), which implied that nonindependence existed to some extent. Accordingly, we conducted the analyses on the couple level, with gender as a repeated measure.

Demand/withdraw interaction. Hypothesis 2 was tested with a $2 \times 2 \times 2$ (Complainant \times Demand/withdraw interaction \times Gender) ANOVA, with Demand/withdraw interaction and Gender as repeated measures (see Fig. 3). The main effect of Complainant was not significant, $F(1, 124) = .06$, *ns*. The main effect of Demand/withdraw interaction was significant, $F(1, 124) = 31.23$, $p < .001$. Wife-demand/husband-withdraw interaction ($M = 3.25$, $SD = 1.45$) was reported more likely to occur than husband-demand/wife-withdraw interaction ($M = 2.69$, $SD = 1.23$). The main effect of Gender was significant, $F(1, 124) = 4.65$, $p < .05$. Wives reported a greater likelihood of demand/withdraw interactions than did their husbands ($M = 3.10$ versus $M = 2.85$).

In support of Hypothesis 2, the analysis revealed a significant interaction effect of

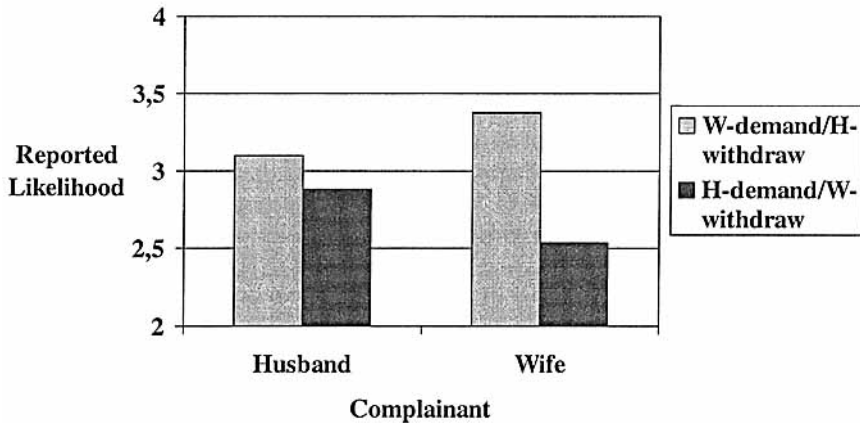


Figure 3. Self-reported likelihood of demand/withdraw interaction as a function of complainant: Study 2.

Complainant by Demand/withdraw pattern, $F(1, 124) = 11.15, p < .001$. When the wife was the complainant, wife-demand/husband-withdraw interaction ($M = 3.38, SD = 1.16$) was reported more likely to occur than husband-demand/wife-withdraw interaction ($M = 2.53, SD = .91$), $t(67) = 6.49, p < .001$. When the husband was the complainant, the reported likelihood of wife-demand/husband-withdraw ($M = 3.10, SD = 1.23$) and husband-demand/wife-withdraw ($M = 2.89, SD = .96$) interaction did not differ significantly, $t(57) = 1.56, ns$.⁴ None of the interaction effects with Gender were significant, $F_s < 1.0, ns$.

As in Study 1, a $2 \times 3 \times 2 \times 2$ (Complainant \times Conflict issue \times Demand/withdraw interaction \times Gender) ANOVA, with Demand/withdraw interaction and Gender as repeated measures, revealed a significant main effect of Conflict issue, $F(2, 120) = 3.16, p < .05$. Demand/withdraw interaction was reported more likely to occur in the housework condition ($M = 3.22, SD =$

.99) than in the paid work condition ($M = 2.70, SD = .95$), $t(85) = 2.47, p < .05$. The means in the housework and child-care ($M = 2.98, SD = .73$) conditions and the means in the paid work and child-care conditions did not differ significantly, $t_s < 1.50, ns$. None of the interaction effects with Conflict outcome or with Gender were significant, $F_s < 1.0, ns$.

To summarize these results, Hypothesis 2 was again supported. Wife-demand/husband-withdraw interaction was reported more likely to occur than husband-demand/wife-withdraw interaction during the hypothesized conflict over the division of labor, but only when the wife was the complainant.

Conflict outcomes. Hypotheses 3a and 3b were tested with a $2 \times 2 \times 2$ (Complainant \times Conflict outcome \times Gender) ANOVA, with Conflict outcome and Gender as repeated measures. The main effects of Complainant and Gender were not significant, $F_s < .40, ns$. The main effect of Conflict outcome was significant, $F(1, 120) = 27.43, p < .001$. In support of Hypothesis 3a, defendants ($M = 3.98, SD = 1.46$) were expected to be more likely to reach their goal than were complainants ($M = 2.98, SD = 1.23$) during hypothetical conflict over the division of labor. The interaction effect of Complainant by Conflict outcome approached significance,

4. Because the alpha reliabilities for the demand/withdraw scales were low, we ran a $2 \times 2 \times 3$ (Complainant \times Demand/withdraw interaction \times Item) ANOVA with Demand/withdraw interaction and the items of the demand/withdraw subscales as repeated measures. This revealed a non-significant three-way interaction, $F(2, 251) = 1.58, ns$. Hence, the items had no significant multivariate effect. In addition, we tested Hypothesis 2 at the item level and this revealed identical results.

$F(1, 120) = 3.51, p = .06$. The reported likelihood that defendants would reach their goal when the wife was the complainant ($M = 3.81, SD = 1.50$) and when the husband was the complainant ($M = 4.13, SD = 1.50$) did not differ significantly, $t(121) = 1.19, ns$. In the role of complainant, however, wives ($M = 3.19, SD = 1.26$) were reported more likely to reach their goal than were husbands ($M = 2.73, SD = 1.15$), $t(120) = 2.08, p < .05$. These results supported Hypothesis 3b, namely that wives are more likely to reach their goal than are husbands in the role of complainant. The analyses revealed a significant interaction effect of Complainant by Gender, $F(1, 120) = 10.04, p < .001$. However, because the hypothesized effects were not qualified by interactions with Gender, we will disregard this effect.

The explanation for Hypothesis 3b was that, in the role of complainant, women are more likely to demand than men, and men are more likely to withdraw than women. Accordingly, the effect of Complainant on the outcome *Complainant reaches goal* should disappear when the wife-demand/husband-withdraw interaction variable is held constant. We tested this with a multivariate analysis of variance on the Conflict outcomes with Complainant as a between-subjects factor and Wife-demand/husband-withdraw interaction as a covariate. The significant univariate F -test for the outcome *Complainant reaches goal*, $F(1, 120) = 4.32, p < .05$, was reduced when wife-demand/husband-withdraw interaction was held constant, $F(1, 118) = 3.48, ns$. However, the analysis showed only a marginal significant regression coefficient for wife-demand/husband-withdraw interaction, $B = .17$ ($t = 1.86, p = .06$). A significance test for the indirect effect of Complainant on the outcome *Complainant reaches goal* via wife-demand/husband-withdraw interaction provided a nonsignificant t -value of 1.22 (for the procedure, see Baron & Kenny, 1986). The analyses showed nonsignificant univariate F -tests for the outcome *Defendant reaches goal*, but revealed a significant regression coefficient for wife-demand/husband-withdraw interaction, $B = .25$ ($t =$

$2.26, p < .05$). In sum, these results do not show strong support for our reasoning that wife-demand/husband-withdraw interaction mediates the effect of Complainant on the outcome *Complainant reaches goal*.

To see whether the conflict issue affected the conflict outcomes, we conducted a $2 \times 3 \times 2 \times 2$ (Complainant \times Conflict issue \times Conflict outcome \times Gender) ANOVA, with Conflict outcome and Gender as repeated measures. The main effect of Conflict issue was not significant, $F(2, 116) = 1.36, ns$. The significant two-way interactions of Complainant by Conflict outcome, $F(1, 116) = 3.79, p = .05$, and of Complainant by Conflict issue, $F(2, 116) = 3.36, p < .05$ were qualified by a significant three-way interaction of Complainant by Conflict outcome by Conflict issue, $F(2, 116) = 3.61, p < .05$. To understand the nature of this three-way interaction, we conducted simple effects analyses testing the main effects of Complainant within each level of Conflict issue, using the overall error term (see Table 2). Because Gender had no main or interaction effects (except for the significant interaction effect of Complainant by Gender), the conflict outcomes were averaged across husband and wife within couples.

The multivariate main effect of Complainant was significant in the Housework condition, $F(2, 115) = 8.50, p < .001$, and the Paid work condition, $F(2, 115) = 3.40, p < .05$. Although the multivariate main effect of Complainant was not significant in the Child-care condition, $F(2, 115) = 1.87, ns$, the univariate F -tests showed a pattern in the expected direction. The univariate tests showed that the main effect of Complainant for the conflict outcome *defendant reaches goal*, was not significant in any of the Conflict issue conditions, $F_s < 1.40, ns$. In the hypothetical role of defendant, the reported likelihood that husbands and wives would reach their goal did not differ across the Conflict issue conditions. For the conflict outcome *complainant reaches goal*, the univariate main effect of Complainant was significant within all Conflict issue conditions, $F_s > 3.77, p = .05$. Consistent with Hypothesis 3b, wives in the role of complainant were

Table 2. Conflict outcomes as a function of complainant and conflict issue: Study 2

Complainant ^a	Conflict issue					
	Paid Work		Housework		Child Care	
	H	W	H	W	H	W
Outcome						
Defendant reaches goal	4.21 (1.03)	4.06 (1.53)	4.48 (1.71)	3.96 (1.41)	3.68 (1.36)	3.45 (1.45)
Complainant reaches goal	2.85 (1.23)	2.35 (1.07)	2.39 (1.16)	3.76 (1.13)	3.11 (.90)	3.55 (1.12)

Note: Standard deviations are in parentheses.

^aH = husband; W = wife.

reported more likely to reach their goal than husbands in the role of complainant in the Housework condition, $F(1, 116) = 17.16$, $p < .001$, and the Child-care condition, $F(1, 116) = 3.77$, $p = .05$. However, in the Paid work condition, wives were reported less likely to reach their goal than husbands in the role of complainant, $F(1, 116) = 6.08$, $p < .05$. This suggests that complainants were more likely expected to reach their goal when the hypothetical conflict concerned their own gender stereotypical domain.

General Discussion

The first aim of the present research was to increase our knowledge about how couples manage (hypothetical) conflict over the division of labor. Our second aim was to gain insight into the impact of asymmetrical conflict structures on marital interaction and outcomes. We addressed three research questions: (1) Which conflict issues with regard to the division of labor are most prominent in couples' lives; (2) How do spouses manage conflict over the division of labor, focusing on asymmetrical demand/withdraw interaction patterns; and (3) What are the outcomes of conflict over the division of labor—status quo maintenance or change?

Conflict issue and demand/withdraw interaction

Study 1 showed that spouses reported more conflict over housework than conflict over

paid work and child care. These results are in line with research that compared conflict over housework with conflict over paid work (Kluwer et al., 1996, 1997). It is important to separate the domains of housework and child care because they differ in many respects. For example, the costs of neglecting child care are quite different from the costs of neglecting housework, and different strategies might be used to change the spouse's involvement in these domains (cf. Deutsch et al., 1993). Both studies showed that, overall, demand/withdraw patterns were reported most likely to occur during the hypothetical conflict over housework. Study 1 also showed that wives were reported more often than husbands to desire a change in their spouses' contribution to the division of labor. Hence, this implies that women tend to be less satisfied with the division of housework than men, and their desire to change their spouse's contribution brings them into conflict with their spouses' efforts to maintain the status quo.

The asymmetrical structure of this particular conflict issue supports the gender linkage in behavior in close relationships—wives' tendency to demand and husbands' tendency to withdraw. In other words, wives' desire to change the division of housework combined with their tendency to demand and husbands' desire to maintain the status quo combined with their tendency to withdraw causes the interaction pattern to become highly stereotyped. Indeed, both Study 1 and Study 2 showed that wife-de-

mand/husband-withdraw interaction was reported more often than husband-demand/wife-withdraw interaction during hypothetical conflict over the division of labor when the wife desired a change in her husband's contribution. When the husband desired change, the interaction patterns were reported equally often.

Our research is the first to show that prior findings on demand/withdraw interaction apply to labor distribution issues, as suggested by some researchers (Heavey et al., 1993; Holmes & Levinger, 1994; Holmes & Murray, 1996). By recognizing that conflict over the division of labor involves an asymmetrical complainant-defendant structure that is likely to result in demand/withdraw interaction patterns, we identified a potential barrier to the resolution of conflict over the division of labor and, consequently, the negotiation of new arrangements and gender roles. Wife-demand/husband-withdraw interaction tends to result in polarization and rigidity (Heavey et al., 1993) and destructive outcomes such as conflict escalation and stalemate (Kluwer et al., 1997). Furthermore, demand/withdraw interaction is negatively related to marital satisfaction (e.g., Christensen & Schenk, 1991; Heavey, Christensen, & Malamuth, 1995; Gottman & Krokoff, 1989) and both violent and non-violent distressed couples report more demand/withdraw interaction than do non-distressed couples (Babcock et al., 1993; Holtzworth-Munroe, Smutzler, & Stuart, 1998).⁵

Although conflict over the division of labor implies women's growing sense of entitlement and provides a means by which women modify traditional gender roles, it

may also function as a trap because women's role as a complainant leads them to resort to the destructive wife-demand/husband-withdraw interaction. Accordingly, the division of housework is bound to come up again and is unlikely to change in a way that satisfies both spouses. This may partly explain why the division of housework often involves an ongoing struggle in close relationships and is least likely to be divided equally. Compared with the division of paid work the division of housework appears to lag behind in becoming less gender segregated (e.g., Kalleberg & Rosenfeld, 1990; Kluwer et al., 1996; Spitze, 1988).

Conflict outcomes

Study 2 showed that defendants were expected to be more likely to reach their goal than complainants during hypothetical conflict over the division of labor. This implies that conflict over the division of labor is more likely to result in status quo maintenance than in change. In general, accomplishing change is difficult because dissenters go against the spirit of the times and have to work against "relationship inertia"—relationships tend to be slow to adapt to new circumstances. Although tolerance and loyalty toward imbalances in the relationship serve relationship maintenance (Holmes & Levinger, 1994), relationships and their surrounding environments are subject to constant change. Disruptions, such as the birth of the first child, present new demands that require new adaptations and arrangements (cf. Belsky & Kelly, 1994). If unaddressed, small problems can grow into larger ones, and spouses may gradually drift out of touch with each other's needs.

Study 2 also showed that wives were expected more likely to reach their goal than were husbands in the role of complainant. The explanation was that wives' tendency to demand would enhance their chance of goal accomplishment when they desired change and husbands' tendency to withdraw would decrease their chance of accomplishing change. Although our analyses showed some support for this explanation, it is somewhat premature to conclude that wife-

5. In Study 2, we collected a reliable measure of marital satisfaction (Rusbult, Martz, & Agnew, 1998), which correlated negatively with wife-demand/husband-withdraw interaction ($r = -.39, p < .001$) and husband-demand/wife-withdraw interaction ($r = -.24, p < .001$). In general, spouses were quite satisfied with their relationship ($M = 7.91, SD = 1.0$, on a 9-point scale). These results suggest that although the demand/withdraw patterns were more pronounced among more dissatisfied couples, even relatively satisfied couples seem to report these interaction patterns during hypothetical conflict over the division of labor.

demand/husband-withdraw interaction mediates the gender difference in goal accomplishment. Further research is needed to address the underlying processes between conflict management and status quo maintenance and change.

An explanation that cannot be ruled out is that women's complaint is viewed as more legitimate, causing husbands to be more willing to change their contribution to the division of labor. In past decades, social norms have gradually shifted toward equality between men and women in both paid and family work, and men face an increasing pressure to become active participants in family work (see Kluwer et al., 1997). These norms may cause husbands to regard it socially unacceptable to refuse their spouses' requests with regard to their contribution to the division of labor. Hence, participants' ratings of conflict outcomes may have been affected by concerns about impression management.

An alternative explanation is that wives have more control over the outcomes because they possess greater knowledge, skill, and information with regard to the division of labor. Accordingly, they can exert informational influence and use their expert power to accomplish change (cf. Babcock et al., 1993; Cromwell & Olson, 1975; French & Raven, 1959). For example, Dovidio, Brown, Heltman, Ellyson, and Keating (1988) found systematic differences in the power-related behaviors of men and women in situations where there was differential familiarity based on the gender-linked nature of the task (i.e., automotive oil changing versus pattern sewing). Indeed, our data show support for this post hoc explanation: Wives were more likely expected to reach their goal than were husbands in the role of complainant, *but only when the conflict concerned housework or child care*. When the conflict concerned paid work, husbands rather than wives were more likely expected to reach their goal in the role of complainant. This implies that complainants stand a better chance of reaching their goal when the conflict concerns their own gender stereotypical domain. Defendants may

also be more resistant to change when it comes to their own gender role. Spouses might be particularly sensitive to criticism regarding their own traditional gender role, because it puts their identity at stake (cf. Baruch & Barnett, 1986; Kluwer et al., 1997). This will occur even more when this identity entails one's major life role (for example, in the case of the full-time housewife/mother or the full-time employee).

Although these post hoc explanations seem liable, it is important to replicate the reported effects. In general, the interplay among power of the status quo, power on other dimensions, and power strategies in terms of behaviors (cf. Babcock et al., 1993; Falbo & Peplau, 1980) appears to be a fruitful direction for further research on asymmetrical conflict. In addition, this research addressed short-term win/lose outcomes only. Future research should not only address other conflict outcomes, such as integrative solutions and impasses, but also the long-term effects of conflict over the division of labor. It may very well be that couples manage to reach more equal arrangement in the domain of family work but fail to implement changes in the long run (see Kluwer et al., 1999).

Study limitations

A few limitations to this research deserve attention. First, the self-report nature of this study merely allows for conclusions about couples' reported representations of marital interaction patterns and outcomes. These representations may not match what spouses would actually do, and they may have been affected by concerns about social desirability and by egocentric biases. For example, individuals tend to view themselves as more cooperative and less competitive than their partner in relationship conflict (Kluwer et al., 1998). Observations of actual conflict behavior would have several advantages for the study of conflict over the division of labor. However, we believe that self-reports of conflict interactions are a valuable method to explore the field among a large subject pool.

Second, although both Study 1 and prior research (Kluwer et al., 1997) suggest that the conflict situations used in this study occur in couples' lives, the scenarios were still hypothetical. A problem with the use of hypothetical scenarios is that the data may reflect spouses' stereotypical beliefs about their own and their partner's behaviors rather than their actual behaviors. However, research has shown that individuals are unlikely to use gender role stereotypes in describing their partner's behavior (Kluwer et al., 1998). Couple members are very familiar with their own and their partner's marital behaviors (i.e., they have access to individuating information about their partner), so they are less likely to rely on (gender) stereotypes (e.g., Fiske & Neuberg, 1990).

The fact that we collected couple data may compensate for these shortcomings to some extent. Our research showed no (within-couple) gender differences on the hypothesized effects, and this convergence between couple members bolsters our conclusions. In general, couple members tend to agree on the presence of demand/withdraw interactions in their relationship (cf. Christensen & Heavey, 1990, 1993; Heavey et al., 1993; Klinetob & Smith, 1996; Noller et al., 1994). If egocentric biases would have colored spouses' reports of their conflict behaviors and outcomes, we would probably have found gender differences in their reports (cf. Kluwer et al., 1998).

The scenarios did not contain information about the absolute or relative amount of work done by spouses, which may have caused the meaning of the scenarios to be ambiguous. The meaning that participants have attached to the scenario has implications for the interpretation of the results, and these interpretations should therefore be made with caution. However, we emphasize that this study focused explicitly on spouses' subjective impressions and *perceptions* of imbalance, not the objective imbalance in the division of labor. The objective imbalance in the division of labor may thus have had less impact on participants' ratings. In addition, it is important to note that

we did not manipulate *the direction of the desired change*. The direction of desired change may affect the results to some extent. For example, making the spouse do something (do more housework) may be subject to different dynamics than making the spouse refrain from doing something (do less housework).

Finally, our conclusions are limited to couples who have recently experienced their transition to parenthood. The transition to parenthood has been found to involve increased levels of conflict and declines in marital satisfaction (e.g., Belsky & Kelly, 1994). New parents tend to report fewer positive interactions and more negative conflict behaviors, such as demand/withdraw interaction, and increased conflict avoidance after their transition to parenthood (Crohan, 1996; Kluwer et al., 1999).

Conclusions

The present research supports a structural/behavioral explanation for the persistence of gender inequality and gender-based roles. The conclusions inform us that marital conflict over the division of labor generally concerns the wife, who is dissatisfied with her husband's contribution to housework, while her husband wants to maintain the status quo. The structure of this dilemma reinforces gender inequality because (a) it activates the asymmetrical demand/withdraw interaction pattern that further escalates the conflict, and (b) it favors status quo maintenance over change. Of course, many couples realize relatively satisfying arrangements. However, both social changes and major life transitions cause couples to reexamine their role arrangements. Perceptions of injustice and imbalance are accentuated at that time, and marital conflict becomes apparent (Holmes & Levinger, 1994). By examining (hypothetical) conflict over the division of labor, this research not only adds to our knowledge about the psychological mechanisms underlying the division of labor but it also identifies a potential barrier in the negotiation of new arrangements and changes in gender roles.

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